

Article

Shankh-er Shongshar, Afterlife Everyday: Religious Experience of the Evening Conch and Goddesses in Bengali Hindu Homes

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Abstract: This essay brings together critical archetypes of Bengali Hindu home-experience: the sound of the evening shankh (conch), the goddess Lakshmi, and the female snake-deity, Manasa. It analyzes the everyday phenomenology of the home, not simply through the European category of the ‘domestic’, but conceptually more elastic vernacular religious discourse of shongshar, which means both home and world. The conch is studied as a direct material embodiment of the sacred domestic. Its materiality and sound-ontology evoke a religious experience fused with this-worldly wellbeing (mongol) and afterlife stillness. Further, (contrary) worship ontologies of Lakshmi, the life-goddess of mongol, and Manasa, the death-and-resuscitation goddess, are discussed, and the twists of these ambivalent imaginings are shown to be engraved in the conch’s body and audition. Bringing goddesses and conch-aesthetics together, shongshar is thus presented as a religious everyday dwelling, where the ‘home’ and ‘world’ are connected through spiraling experiences of life, death, and resuscitation. Problematizing the monolithic idea of the secular home as a protecting domain from the outside world, I argue that everyday religious experience of the Bengali domestic, as especially encountered and narrated by female householders, essentially includes both Lakshmi/life/fertility and Manasa/death/renunciation. Exploring the analogy of the spirals of shankh and shongshar, spatial and temporal experiences of the sacred domestic are also complicated. Based on ritual texts, fieldwork among Lakshmi and Manasa worshippers, conch-collectors, craftsmen and specialists, and immersion in the everyday religious world, I foreground a new aesthetic phenomenology at the interface of the metaphysics of sound, moralities of goddess-devotions, and the Bengali home’s experience of afterlife everyday.

Keywords: Bengali home; sacred domesticity; shankh; conch; Lakshmi; Manasa; shongshar

1. Introduction

Samsara is an enigmatic term. Pronounced as *shongshar* in Bengali, it refers to the general metaphysical cycle of life-as-such, including abstract and cosmic space-time, life as handed down through generations, as well as one’s immediate domestic existence.¹ So *shongshar* is not only an ontological given: it is critically enacted upon, understood, intended, and managed. So the most obvious use of the Bengali term is *shongshar kora*, or “doing *shongshar*”. In this, the *shongshari* person, literally, the householder, controls a slice of abstract time and space, upon which she/he works and realizes the experience of *samsara*. This slice is the home. Thus, the home is the spatial counterpart of the temporal everyday. The home manifests with the world, not apart from it; dimensions of cosmic

¹ In the text I mostly use vernacular spellings as per pronunciation, such as, *shongshar*, *Lokkhi* (for the goddess Lakshmi), *mongol* (peace) etc.; and Sanskrit spellings like *samsara*, *Lakshmi*, *mangal* etc., when referring either to Sanskrit contexts or other people’s writings. Also, I italicize *lokkhi*, when the term is used as an adjective to mean domesticated, rather than as a proper name.

space and time are folded upon this everyday home, such that the home is definitely not outside the cosmic world, but it also has an embodied independence, not fully assimilable in abstract conceptions. Thus, *shongshar* supersedes boundaries of inside-outside, agency-existence, now and before-after.

This essay, based on in-depth ethnographic research, brings together three sacred archetypes of Bengali domestic religious experience, to reimagine the *shongshar* in ways that address continual cultural undertones. These three sacralities are: (contrary) goddess-universes of Lakshmi and Manasa, and the material object, *shankha* (pronounced as *shankh*), or conch-shell. The moment when these sacralities coalesce is dusk. Ubiquitous in all Bengali homes, irrespective of caste/class, is the daily ritual of *shondhe dewa* or performing evening rites. Women tie their hair, clean their homes, water their *tulsi* plants, perform a short *puja* in the *thakurghor* (literally, gods' room, referring to the household's sanctum), and then blow on the *shankh* three times in a long, relaxed manner. Blowing the conch primarily signifies the calling in and experience of domestic *mongol* (auspiciousness): peace, health, and fortune. Right at that liminal moment, when day is slipping into night, every Bengali household captures that short span of dusk in embodied discourse, which although shall pass, twirls through the conch's spiral folds, sounding it, and opening out into the night's expanse. The *shankh*'s sound is heavy and long, yet always ends suddenly. It both reminds of the day gone, and the night's arrival. Riding precisely on this dyad of nostalgia as a reminder of dark death and invitation as a reminder of life, arrive two critical goddess figures of Bengal: Manasa and Lakshmi.

So sacred sound traveling through *shankh*'s bends and apertures evokes an everyday sonic experience in which domestic space and time do not remain confined to the home's walls, but necessarily flow into an outside. Using the contours of the *shankh*'s material imagination, this paper shall thus also problematize straightforward notions of interiority: of homes, women, and the nation, and argue that senses of 'inside' securities are equally vulnerable, and religious experiences also tell us other stories of expanse and magnitude. The experience of *mongol*, which is central to the discourse of Bengali households, has subtle overlaps with everyday objects like the conch and the imagination of goddesses. It addresses unobvious but entwined experiential aspects like life, death, and resuscitation.

So, understanding everyday life and ethics not simply through the European category of the 'domestic' (see Chakrabarty 1993, pp. 3–4), but vernacular discourse of *shongshar*, problematizes unequivocal notions of privacy, sanctity, and secured comforts of the home, afforded by postcolonial critique. *Shongshar* literally refers to both the home and the cosmic world, and suggests how the home also dissolves. The essay works with a folded artefact as an embodiment of *shongshar*'s innermost sanctum, and analyzes its material life as a creasing of opposed ethical religious experiences: life and death, fertility and abandonment.

Shondhe dewa, all women I encountered during my fieldwork, agree, is an unspoken summon to Lakshmi (pronounced in Bengali as Lokkhi), the goddess of auspiciousness, peace, welfare, and life generally. It is requesting her to be resolutely seated in the altar/home and protecting it from the fear that is dark.² Yet dusk shall inevitably slither into night, and the conch-sound shall necessarily slip into an oceanic outside. And like the call of death, the sea is scarier in the evenings. Thus, our efforts (to cling to day/life) are only that, and there is also the pull towards the goddess of the dark.

So Bengali *shongshar* is equally respectful of Manasa—queen of a thousand snakes—the goddess of death. Evening is when humans don't see, and snakes are at a privilege ... they feel the touch of sundown and their hissing reign begins. Like the evening conch, the female snake-goddess is of typical Bengali specificity, distinct from the worship of male snake-gods and living snakes (Bhattacharya 1965, p. 1; Dimock and Ramanujan 1962, p. 312).³ The coiling/uncoiling of the snakes is the twisting of the *shankh*, and thus so many Bengali snake names carry the conch prefix or

² Lokkhi is imagined as a restless deity, threatening to leave, implying the always-vulnerable status of wealth and peace.

³ Associations of snakes with divine femininity began in the Mahabharata (Dimock and Ramanujan 1962, p. 313), but the serpentine goddess form is fully developed only in Bengal.

suffix: *Mahashankha*, *Shankhachur*, *Shankhanag*, *Shankhabora*, *Shankhapala* etc., and the famous puranic serpent-king is also named, *Shankha*.⁴

The Bengali domestic experience thus finds shelter under both Lokkhi's feet and the snake's hood. Every evening, through *shankh*'s folds, the "intimate immensity" (see [Bachelard 1994](#)) of the Bengali *shongshar* invites both Lokkhi/Manasa, life/death, and reminisces the time past, and time to come. Children learn the early trick of listening to sea-waves by holding the conch to the ear. Indeed, in Hindu imaginings, the conch carries the primordial AUM sound, which, like the goddess Lakshmi and conch, emanated from the first churning of the ocean. The sea's vast equanimity and the buzzing AUM sound always remind of afterlife stillness, and that the sea shall eventually take away all belonging. Yet the conch remains seated in the kernel of the home, the quintessential domain of attachment and protection. So it is a material model of cozy interiority, whose folds also however twirl towards expanse. The conch and goddesses thus come together to define *shongshar*'s religious experience fused with this-worldly wellbeing (*mongol*) and afterlife quiet.

This material allegory echoes in *shankha*'s linguistic lifeworld. Its etymological breakup would be *sham* + *kha*. *Sham* implying *mongol* (goodness), and *kha* (void). So *shankha* would literally mean a 'good void', the hollow/emptiness which is a moral charter for domesticity. So, while the metonyms—home/kernel/kitchen/women/nation—are generally intrinsically associated with fullness, containment, and pure sufficiency, on the ideational basis that women are essentially tied subjects, fixed to their bodies, duties, and homes; the 'good void' idea however talks of a necessary aperture as well, like the snake's slit tongue. I try to sound the domestic through that split.

It may be objected that other gods and goddesses too are worshipped in Bengali domestic altars, and the choice of Lokkhi and Manasa may skew the analysis. However, there are critical rationales for the choice of these goddess stereotypes. A feminine modality of devotional aesthetics is the primary focus of this essay's arguments, and a stretched field of imagination where goddesses embody very opposed poles of mythic themes, is productively instrumental in unfolding such aesthetic nuances. Also for instance, while Lokkhi's consort Narayana is worshipped in these households, the goddess is much more popular, and considered especially proximate, compared to a more distant Narayana. So a significantly greater number of daily, weekly, and annual rituals, offerings, and prayers are assigned to her. Finally, there are a number of symbolic and experiential overlaps which bind the universes of gods and goddesses. Thus, Narayana himself holds the conch in one of his hands, snakes coil and adorn Shiva's neck, and Vishnu/Narayana rests on the famous serpent, Ananta. Thus, the field I explore in this article undoubtedly has many possible connections with other deity worship disciplines, but here I primarily explore the experiential extension of life and death, fertility and abandonment, woven in the conch-crafted Bengali domesticities of Lokkhi and Manasa.

The tied woman fits the Lakshmi stereotype. The *thakurghor*, which has not yet been fully explored in literature, is also a quintessential marker of interiority, peace, and health. But through imaginaries which include Lakshmi, but also Manasa, and the conch, I problematize the experience of fertility in Bengal, and ask, whether an openness to death/renunciation/freedom complicates questions of femininity, home, and the nation. Inner sanctums are also called *garbha griha*, literally, womb-room. This term is telling, since the room nests, while the womb also opens up (to give birth). The sacred conch-folds address this very experiential dyad of insideness and infinity.

In tracing the workings of the Bengali home's religious experience, I engage with ethnographic insights among conch-collectors and craftsmen of different traditional *shankh* sites, priests and devotees of Lakshmi and Manasa, and other ritual, textual and artifact material of Bengal. Although Manasa worship is definitely more popular among lower castes and classes of both west and east Bengalis, other classes of people still worship her ([Bhattacharya 1965](#), p. 5). Lokkhi too is worshipped by people

⁴ There are many South Asian snake-conch stories, including how the North Indian snake god, Naga Devata, crept out of a sage's conch.

cross-caste/class. Lokkhi primarily represents qualities of restoration and health, and Manasa, of (cure from) disease, crisis, rupture, and disaster. At the outset it seems that Lokkhi and her model of domesticity are more relatable to all sections of society, for their mild, pure qualities. So even when a lower-caste/class household worships Manasa, she represents to them Lokkhi-like aspects. But while in her domesticated form Manasa is Lokkhi, her venomous passion also threatens the home.⁵

While the two goddesses share qualities, I argue that they primarily however represent opposite dimensions, which all different classes of people identify with. My ethnography suggests that in households which worship Lokkhi, narratives of family jointness, nuclearity, working women, housewives are all woven together through experiences of wellbeing and peace; while in those which worship Manasa, experiences of fear, death, and *niyoti* (fate) often dominate. Through such a class/caste entangled group, tied narratives of fertility, purity, death, and scare, and the conch's sound-world, I hope to intuit some common Bengali Hindu understandings of the experience of home/*shongshar*.

2. Entwined Everyday

The embroiling of the goddess of purity, goddess of poison, object-world of *shankh*, home, dusk, and the world, took effort to recognize. Connected vignettes of the Bengali everyday point to these entangled religious experiences.

Fertility is one such entangling meta-thematic. Married women wear red bordered saris, red paint (*alta*) on the feet, vermillion (*sindur*), white, red, and iron (*sh(n)akha*, *pola*, and *loha*) bangles, and for those who can afford, a lot of gold ornaments. Red is the color of fertile abundance, *sh(n)akha* made of conch-dust, a symbol of lush purity, iron, of (matrimonial) protection, and gold, of wealth. Such a woman is literally called Lokkhi, an everyday mortal embodiment of Vishnu's consort. The deity-couple, Vishnu-Lakshmi, is associated with *samsaric* preservation, symbolized also in Vishnu's conch, the *panchajanya*; and Lakshmi's *vahana* (mount), the owl, is also seated on a conch. The heavens and the mundane thus meet in the restorative home, in Lokkhi's fertile figure. Every home-altar has a *mongol-ghot*, a pot full of water, which signifies *shongshar's* fullness: bountiful grains in the kitchen and the Lokkhi wife's plentiful womb. Thursdays (and all full-moon nights) are considered auspicious for Lokkhi's worship, when her *panchali*, a ritual ode, is sung.

But the *ghot* is also Manasa's emblem. All through Bengal's rainy months (*Ashadh*, *Sravan*, *Bhadra*), the ultimate sign of tropical fertility, snakes thrive, and so does Manasa's worship. A staple shrine in rural Bengali homes is dedicated to her (the *sij* tree, which can cure poison). Bengal is most snake-infested, has innumerable references to them in songs, novels, myths, rhymes, and practices, and villagers, out of fear, do not even name the snake after sundown. Similarly, Manasa is a most popular deity, and folk narratives and scroll-paintings about her personality, feats, and worship are abundant (see R. Chatterjee 2000, pp. 9–12). Bengalis grow up with the idea that the Manasa Mangalkavya documents details of Manasa's life. Of these narratives, the most celebrated is the Manasa–Behula tryst.⁶

Manasa had an intensely sad life in the heavens. She was born of Shiva's sperm when he ejaculated imagining Parvati. She shares his sovereignty over all snakes and poison. Shiva's seed trickled to the underworld interstices on a lotus leaf, where snakes took care of it, and Manasa took form. Manasa thus embodies divine pleasures gone astray. She is beautiful, sexually irresistible, and manipulative on one hand, and kind-natured on the other. She is thus both insurmountable and believable to her devotees. She is never able to develop strong bonds of the home. Her step-mother, Shiva's wife, Chandi, is jealous of her and so she is deserted by her father. Her husband also leaves her on the wedding night. However, she has complete triumph over both life and death of Bengal's populations.

⁵ So I theorize beyond the educated middle classes that Chakrabarty (1993) and Sarkar (2001) were referring to in understandings of Bengali domesticity. Unless we involve different classes and faith-worlds of the Manasa/Lokkhi *pujas*, we cannot problematize monolithic understandings of the home or home–Lakshmi (Chakrabarty 1993). See also (Ganesh 1990).

⁶ For details of Manasa's story, see (Haq 2015). Scholars debate about relations among folk literature, Sanskrit *puranas*, and Mahabharata, in the tellings about Manasa (see Chatterji 2014, pp. 1–4; Clark 1955, pp. 511–12, 516; Doniger 2015, pp. 1–28).

Only, the Shiva-worshipper, merchant, Chand, refuses to worship her. She destroys all his ships and riches, kills his six sons, and then a seventh, Lakhindar.

Herein becomes important the figure of Behula, Lakhindar's wife, who through sheer dedication to her husband and Manasa, undertakes the most arduous journey with Lakhindar's dead body across riverine Bengal, travels to the heavens, prays to Manasa, and brings Lakhindar back to life. Behula, the perfect wife/devotee, forbearance, the journey across rivers, and resuscitation, have become most powerful archetypes of Bengali marital imagination. Lakhindar was bitten by *kalnagini*, the snake of time/death (*kal*). This death was foretold, and thus his father, Chand, had built an iron room for the new-wed couple. But by Manasa's orders, a small hole was made on a wall by the blacksmith, for *kalnagini* to enter. As a mythical enactment of empathy with Behula, Bengali wives traditionally stay up with their husbands on the first night of marriage, literally known as *kalratri*, or the possible night of death, and wear iron bangles, as signs of (Behula's) immortal marriage (see also [Fruzzetti 1990](#), p. 157).

Evidently, ambivalences characterize these experiences. Behula is the reminder of Lokkhi's morality. However, Bengal has an equally powerful oppositional archetype, A-lokkhi, who is disorganized, unrestful, and a symbol of impending poverty, disease, disaster, and death. So, as Lakhindar's/Behula's enemy, Manasa symbolizes A-lokkhi. But Behula is her devotee, and it is Manasa's snakelike powers of regeneration again, which eventually bring Lakhindar to life. So Manasa is also worshipped by barren women to secure children, cure diseases, and return life. Even in her constant death-reminders, Manasa is also experienced as Lokkhi.

Thus, everyday beliefs, rituals, and objects of *shongshar* embody representations of Lokkhi/Manasa, day/night, life/death, and attachment/detachment. My informants recounted that Manasa's husband, the sage Jaratkaru, did not wish to marry, but had to, due to foretold fate. Thus, there was divine intervention in the form of *sandhya devi* (goddess of dusk), who appeared much earlier than usual one day. It is a ritual among auspicious/Lokkhi women to wake everyone before dusk to avoid *omongol/okolyan* (impurity), and thus Manasa woke him up. But *sandhyadevi* immediately vanished, the sun reappeared, Jaratkaru was angry, and deserted his A-lokkhi wife. So Manasa tried to be Lokkhi, but was fooled by the evening. She is thus forever enraged by the dusk, takes on her angriest avatar then, and ravishes in killings. She henceforth established her powers over the goddess of dusk, and the god of sleep/death, Yama, such that when snakes strike, they are silent (like sleep) and put others to sleep.

But this dreadful snake-goddess can return life, just as she can kill. She is the most dangerous combination of eros and poison. She maintains rights over her dead bodies, the snake-bitten corpses, who in Bengal, are not burned like ordinary Hindus, but floated in the river, in the hope that she may revive them. Manasa's husband deserts her, her sexual powers remain concentrated, and get activated in complete control over death and (re)birth. Unlike Lokkhi's/Behula's, her husband does not stay/return. Manasa can neither be imagined as an immaculate virgin, nor as domesticated. She stands alone (yet) as a sexualized being. The term used for her in *panchalis* and ritual texts, is *shoirindhri* ([Dvija and Shastri n.d.](#), p. 7). It carries connotations of living in another's home, and solitariness. All these goddess stories evoke powerful ideas about how Bengali women experience femininity and domesticity as both secured and vulnerable, sites of both fear and hope.

Dusk remains a critical time for both goddesses: one needs to be invited desperately to ward off the other's dangers. This is also the time to return home, the all-important abode of rest and regeneration. In Bengali imaginings, long flowing night-like black hair is a woman's adornment, but it is also the mark of unrestrained lust and death. So, *lokkhi* women tie their snakelike hair into buns before the evening ritual. But the conch's swirls remain mysterious.

Shankha is one of Vishnu's central symbols and a critical sacred object in the *puranas* and Mahabharata. Apart from its religious significance, and therapeutic usages in ayurveda and yoga, it is an insistent metaphor of fertile femininity through links with other water symbols like the snake. The most common kind of *shankh* kept in Bengali homes is Lokkhi *shankh*, the symbol of pure order. However, apart from ideas of Lokkhi's restorative conch, one of Manasa's eight major snakes is also *shankhanaga*, since Manasa too has powers over the coiled conch.

The sensory life of this artifact also tells a similar ambivalent tale about domestic religious experience. Visually, its inward coils remind of the invitation (*ahoban*) to Lokkhi to come home, while its outward-bound sound opens out to the dark expanse of the nighttime sea. This twirling of remembering and forgetting seats the depths of time in the conch-space; its concentricity weaves through a hopeful Lokkhi and feared Manasa.

Metonymic connections among the conch, snakes, and home are amply evident in South Asian discourse. The ancient text, *Manasara Vastushastra*, studies the science of architecture/inhabitation (*vastu*) of any construction: from a bird's nest to a palace. Following minute measurements and astrological principles, every aspect of the 'inside' is planned, including the deities'/Lakshmi's altar. Snakes are critical design thematics therein (P. K. Acharya 1942). *Naag chakras*, or coiled serpentine motifs, are also important in the 1969 *vastu* text, *Vishvakarma Darpan* (Sachdev 2005, p. 167). Similarly, during the *Shravan* month *Manasa puja*, alongside evening readings of *Manasa* tales before groups of women, a critical object of folk-art, *karandi*: model of a small house, is made, with drawings (*alipana*) of serpents on it. This is worshipped with the *Manasa* idol, and sometimes *in its place* (Bhattacharya 1965, p. 6). So the *karandi* is representative of the home/*Manasa*/snakes, which are metaphoric substitutes.

Snakes as guardians of homes and ancestral treasures (*vastu-shaap*) also feature in longstanding fables. The term 'vastu', generally glossed as house, is significant. Shulman (1978), in his analysis of a Tiruvarur anthill myth, talks about the anthill's relations with the nether world, snakes, and *vastu*. The anthill, or god's home, leads to the underworld of the dead and snakes. This anthill is also the site of the end of cosmic sacrifice. The term thus literally means remainder (of the sacrifice). So, if *shongshar*'s everyday religious experience is a sacrifice to the divine altar, then what stays, the residue/habitat/resident is the home. The *vastu* is what remains, and also opens to the after-world: the lived *shongshar* of domesticity and the cosmic *samsara*.

Similar to the temporality of the conch-artifact, *vastu*, or remain, is thus also about a nostalgic past, which *remains* (in the architecture and experience of the home and mind). Snakes have been important metaphors of ancestry, antiquity, and primevalism (see Wake 1873); and it is thus in notions of both the spatial (home) and temporal (remain) depth that the idea of *shongshar* operates.

So I argue that in understandings of the Bengali domestic (religious) experience, we need to go beyond secular-historicist tropes of postcolonial literature (see Chakrabarty 1993). K. Chatterjee (2008) uses 18th century Mangalkavya narratives, including the *Manasa-mangal*, to argue that premodern cultures also had tangible imperatives in senses of history, or *itihasa*. So linear temporality here is being extended to the precolonial. But I argue that domestic experience, as especially understood through conch passages and goddess stories, offers its own senses of sacred time, which go beyond pre-/post-colonial paradigms. The conch-prism is an allegory: with its hole and swirls refracting light and sound to other spaces and times.

Everyday, afterall, is a temporal category. It exceeds; has a life beyond historicity. The goddess of death and Behula's riverine struggle with her are etched in the Bengali everyday domestic ethic. So "The Bengali past itself combines with death in the image of a dark depth from where the rivers, now constituting some kind of primeval past, send forth their primeval call. That call does not belong to the past. It comes from a future that at the same time is a return" (Chakrabarty 2004, p. 681). The conch's coils also speak about this sacred temporal experience.

3. Twists of the Conch, Folds of the Home

The conch is the material model of depth-aperture, interiority-expansion, hearth-vastness, and past-future dimensions. I argue that in the context of Bengali domestic religious experience, its sensory world embodies both fertility and renunciation, Lokkhi and Manasa.

The *kha* of *shankha* carries the subtlest message. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy explains that it is the direct metaphoric translation of empty space. It means cavity generally, and the nave of a wheel, in the Rig Veda (Coomaraswamy 1934, p. 487). Mathematically, it represents zero, with connotations of both fullness and void (ibid, p. 493). This zero is not an origin, but a potentiality: infinity of concentric

movements (ibid, p. 490). In this, its cognate term is Ananta, end-less, which is also the *puranic* serpent (ibid, p. 491). *Kha* also correlates with *nabha/nabhi*, the navel (ibid, p. 487). This alludes to the potential/expansive spatiality of the human body, in its navel and heart-space (ibid, p. 490, 493). So the conch-opening (*kha*) signifies both corporeal and domestic fullness, and simultaneous emptiness; both plenum and void, security and openness. The experience of *shankh's* ontology is therefore distinct from the phenomenology of roundness, theorized by Gaston Bachelard (1994, pp. 232–41). The conch-vessel is not fully interior, but rather, spirals towards expanse.

Everyday experiences of the *shankh* narrate similar senses of body and space.

The lower caste Bengali community who collect conches from the sea, work as craftsmen on its surface, sell conches and conch-products, and play a critical role in marriages by putting on the white bangle made of conch-dust on women's wrists, are called *shankharis*.⁷ A *shankhari* explained that only their caste can make the bride wear the conch-bangle since it is fragile and needs handling expertise. Thus, despite being a low-caste person the *shankhari* touches the bride irrespective of her caste, and as a mark of respect, in addition to giving him his remuneration, the bride touches his feet. In this, he said, their caste is higher than Brahmins. This marital symbol of Lokkhi, asserts folklore, was first put on Parvati by Shiva, disguised as a *shankhari* (Fruzzetti 1990, pp. 69–70). Similarly, the caste which makes iron bangles for married women, claim to be descendants of the blacksmith who made Behula-Lakhindar's marriage quarter (Fruzzetti 1990, p. 158). So all symbols of marital fortification are simultaneous symbols of Lokkhi/Manasa/conches.

Shankharis and conch-users relate to the *shankh's* anatomy through various ideas and practices concerning its interiors. Like the insides of the sea, conch-interiors are considered innately sacred, and devotees adorn their entire physical and spiritual selves and homes by using its internal parts: in *ayurveda*, sound yoga, astrology, and fertility rites. The *shankh's* sacrality is asserted by people in terms of debates on its depthful naturalness and ritual value. These ideas also connect the conch to the *vastu*: snakes/homes/women.

Through my work with *shankharis* I realized that there are three main uses of the conch: nutritional/ayurvedic, since conch dust is sold for treatment of stomach and skin diseases, fertility problems, and as fish food; in worship rituals; and in marriage rites. In ritual contexts, there are two main conch types: *jol-shankh*: ones which are used to store Ganga water and not sounded, and *badyo-shankh*: those with slit mouths for sounding. All three uses relate to the domestic experience of *mongol*: fertility, peace, longevity, and wellbeing. The *puranas* also talk about the links of conch with fame, wealth, life on one hand; and the primordial meditative calm embodied in Buddha's navel, on the other. Simply blowing on the conch is considered therapeutic, since it involves a sophisticated exercise of breath-control. Through the inhaling-exhaling rhythm experience, the mouth, breath-cavity, and body-interior become sonic extensions of the twirled conch.

It is popularly also believed that sounding the conch during floods or cyclones heal them. This is based on the South Asian homoeopathic logic that same cures same, as for snakes/Manasa, poison cures poison.

Notions of naturalness and originality are vital with respect to conches. All *shankharis* told me that an original *shankh* (and even the *sh(n)akha* which a woman wears) is never perfectly round, and every conch is distinct. Although craftsmen work on conch-surfaces and make designs, they assert that the *shankh* is a natural sacred object, and as humans, they are always less than the entity; they are subordinate to their 'creation'. They recraft it only minimally, so they don't tamper with its naturalness.

There are two significant worship conches. The *homochori Lakshmi shankh* is decorated with *sindur* and worshipped. It is the most common kind of *shankh*, and represents everything the goddess stands for. So *shankharis* explained that people buy them to "keep Lokkhi at home": to increase wealth, and fight

⁷ I worked with *shankhari* communities in important centres of conch-work and sale in and around Kolkata: in Kalighat, Bagbazar, and Barrackpore.

a-shanti (unrest). In addition to rhetorics of wealth and peace, the rare conch variety, *Dakshina shankh* or *Narayanshankh*, with the right sided fold, is also worshipped for three days by people who want to get married, or have children. A *shankhari* said aptly, “It is of *shongshar*’s use.” ‘Use’ surely refers to the potent idea of fertility. Narayan Shankh is considered to be of greater sacred value than Lakshmi Shankh, and thus *shankharis*, to respect its naturalness, do not slit its mouth. So this *shankh* is not sounded, but only adorns domestic altars.

Given ideas of nature, fertility, and wealth, I asked *shankharis* what may be defined as a *shankh*. I received two distinct responses. One was that a *shankh* must be used in *puja*, and to make a woman’s *sh(n)akha*. A *shankhari* said, “No expensive jewellery shall suffice, unless the *shankh* is sounded and the bride wears a *sh(n)akha*.” In this explanation, only that which can be used for sanctifying the (fertile) home and woman is a *shankh*. Other conches, for instance, octopus-like ones which *shankharis* buy from the Andamans, or *batishankh*, *dishyashankh* etc., which are decorative and cannot be cut, are not considered sacred. In another opinion however, these too should be considered as *shankh*, since they are natural. In this view, the conch’s sacrality rests with the object’s naturalness, not ritual value.

These distinct representations stem however from similar experiences of conch-depth. Montagu also says about Central American conch-pottery craftsmen that they have persistent relations with conch-depths, canals, air-paths, and are “intoxicated by the exuberance of their own virtuosity” (Montagu 1981, p. 276). Bengali craftsmen’s relations with conch-interiors begin with intuitions about how many folds there are inside it. The terms they use are *pyanch/g(n)it*, literally, coil/knot. Some say there are two-and-a-half folds, some three, some three-and-a-half. The *pyanch* is an interesting problem, since it can only be intuited: when intact, the inside is invisible, once opened up, the folds disappear. There are approximately three faint surface fold-lines, with which *shankharis* make sense of the inside. Correctness about the fold-number is not important. Rather, it is significant that there are senses of the intense inside, full of potential, which *shankharis* say, must be experienced fully in the home-interiors and women’s bodies.

For instance, *shankharis* identify the conch’s navel, *b(n)aj* or *shankh-nabhi*, a little flat portion, which is hung on children’s bodies to treat stomach illnesses and ward off evil—similar to Manasa-fortified iron bangles. Children also wear conch-end pieces (*padak*) for six months after birth (Fruzzetti 1990, p. 157). In rural Bengal, the *d(n)arash* snake coils around cows’ feet and sucks all their milk. Villagers say that cows cannot milk after that. So, another conch-portion, *chali*, is tied on cows’ necks to ensure fertility. Here too, we find homoeopathic ideas of curing (snake)-poison with (conch-) poison. Another portion, *g(n)at*, is used to make amulets for people’s *mongol*.

One may ask whether the *shankh* has sacred value because it has a useful depth, or it is put to use because it is naturally/ritually valuable. Either way, it is significant that its sacred depth is recognized, and reinteriorized (in body-homes) through notions of *mongol* experience. I argue however, that although *shankh*’s obvious discursive connections are with Lokkhi, in the phenomenology of *shongshar*, it also carries other meanings.

Shankharis say that the conch’s body is Vishnu’s embodiment under the waters. When it is brought out from its habitat, it loses life, and emits a smell. A *shankhari* used a domestic metaphor and said, “When you break its home, it loses its power.” But this home is not broken. Through establishing relations with its sacred interior, the dwelling is transposed from the sea-abode to other sacred spaces: the altar and the fertile body. In that, it reinvigorates their life-giving qualities. But when sounded every dusk, its interior echo spurts out of its shell, travels through every nook, corner and interstice of the home, and necessarily escapes into the outside. Its sonic universe approximates the profound oceanic gush (of depth, death, and renunciation), and the home opens out to the sea again. In bringing the *shankh* home, we bring nature into the domestic, but simultaneously remind ourselves (also) of nature’s innate freedom as opposed to *shongshar*’s bondage. So freedom’s natural state dies when brought to the world, but the renunciate spirit, through the conch’s primordial sound, still permeates *shongshar*’s religious experience.

Montagu says that conch-acoustics is complex, and little studied (Montagu 1981, p. 274). Following logics of sensory sympathy, there is always phenomenological similitude between the perceiving organ and the perceived object. Likewise, one can posit an intrinsic relation among the ear, conch, and *shongshar*. Also, etymologically, *samsara/shongshar* refers to a circularity of being, but one which is not a perfect circle, and repeats with a difference. Like the conch, it is a spiral. The hearing part of the ear, the cochlea, or inner ear, is similarly shaped like a coil, and its Greek root literally means a spiral, snail shell. The cochlea is made of half-water, half-air; that is, it is half-full, half-empty. Air passing through it causes (sonic) waves in the water, and we can hear and maintain balance. This empty, *kha*, in the ear/conch, is thus essential for the generation of sound-experience. I argue that this empty also brings the conch/ear in sympathetic proximity with *shongshar*, the domestic experience. *Shongshar's* opening is constitutive of its everyday performance; essential to its experience of fullness and wellbeing is the simultaneous sense of relinquishment.

In a scientific reading, Shaw argues about wave-sounds that we hear in the conch: that they are produced by “successive reverberations of external sounds against the interior side of the conch” (Shaw 1875, p. 69). What we hear when we place the conch on the ear, itself coiled with air passage like the conch, is only an echo, a return. The sound returns from *shongshar* to *shankh*. Rather than the conch itself holding the sound, if there is no ‘noise’ in *shongshar*, the conch will not sound. So, conch-layers are (like) folds of everyday life: only when there is life, is renunciation heard. Fullness and emptiness, order and excess, necessarily fulfill each other. By keeping the conch in the house, we do not invite renunciate possibilities; rather in hearing the sea in its shaded interiors, the householder experiences infinitude, resurrection, and genesis within domesticity.

There are thus contrary modes of phenomenological argument: that the conch’s body manifests both fertility and renunciation (Lokkhi and Manasa), and the domestic is modeled after this materiality. Alternatively, the conch sounds the external world, or is a representation of its experiential possibilities. Either way, we reach an analytic of the domestic religious experience which twirls through a depthful closure of life, and possible aperture of escape.

Folds of the conch/home entail ideas of continuous regeneration, too. In this, links of conches, snakes and domesticity become significant again. In South Asian imagination, the snake’s shedding off skin and gaining new life is typically symptomatic of its powers of immortality and healing. The snake can move as it wants to, curl, put off old age, regain youth, increase strength, and even, consume itself (Wake 1873, p. 380). So Shulman says, “... it is surely no accident that a serpent has come, as Adisesa, to embody the idea of the remainder ... The serpent emerges from his own aged skin; he is the remainder of himself, an equivalent of the dangerous, fiery, yet fertile and productive seed. The serpent is the *vastu*; it is, therefore, not surprising that the Vastupurusa becomes a Vastunaga” (Shulman 1978, p. 124).

In Bengal, poisonous snakes are burnt when they die, since otherwise it is believed that they can be reborn. However, *vastu-shaaps*, ones which live in homes, are never killed, since like Lokkhi’s altar, they are considered as the domestic kernel. Killing them would destroy the home and all fertility. Equally powerful Bengali lores talk about dead snakes being exchanged for health and wealth; and snakes and goddesses appearing on the hearth to bless the household with unlimited grains. Like conch-dust which is used to treat illnesses, in Manasa *puja*, earthen snakes are made, which are kept at home even after the *puja*, since dried snake-earth is considered therapeutic (Bhattacharya 1965, pp. 5–6). Mating is the perfect regenerative sign, and in rural Bengal, snakes’ mating-act is considered auspicious, and literally known as ‘*shankh laga*’: joining of conches.

4. Lokkhi Pujo: Mongol and Rehabilitation

The goddess Lokkhi, and women who embody her qualities in the home, literally referred to as Lokkhi *meye* (the ideal girl) or *bou* (wife/bride), are responsible for *shongshar's mongol*: purity, health, and wellbeing (Fruzzetti 1990, p. 123). In this context, the term *lokkhichara* is a significant ethical charter, meaning without-Lokkhi, or abandoned by Lokkhi. The woman who does not embody the goddess’s

qualities *is lokkhichara*, and shall *be lokkhichara*, that is, without wealth/peace. So one has to be a certain way to attain a certain state; an ethical present determines a domestic/cosmic future.⁸

A critical way to understand the Lokkhi-domesticity experience and ethic is by reading *panchalis*.⁹ *Panchalis* are “Pre-British folk literature” (Chakrabarty 1993, p. 8) describing the goddess’s qualities, mantras, and efficacy of worship (see also Mohanty 2008, p. 6; Rhodes 2010, p. 8). These texts dedicated to all twelve months of her worship, are most popular devotional manuals in Bengali homes, and married women read them every Thursday, and on full moon evenings.

There are general guidelines for Lokkhi’s worship. She is a collected deity, and dislikes restless bell-sounds; but *shankh-dhvani* (conch-echo) is indispensable, since it is the definitive *mongol* sign. The conch is specially worshipped during her *puja*, also as a symbol of Kuvera, the god of wealth (Paranavitana 1955, p. 125). After Lokkhi’s *puja*, women take food-grains in their hands, and listen to the *panchalis’ brotokotha* (worship-tales). Her idol is not immersed unlike other goddesses’, since her leaving the home is considered inauspicious.

In the *panchali*, the Thursday *puja* experience is described as very clingy towards the goddess: requesting her to be *ochola* (resolutely seated in the home), not *nidoya* (heartless) or *chonchol* (restless), the devotee promising to serve her feet-shadow (*padachaya*), and linger around her. Lokkhi’s invitation is not only to the home (*aloy*), but also other metonymic interior domains: the altar (*thakurghor*), worship pot (*ghot*), kitchen-grains (*dhan*), and devotee’s heart (*hriday*). Such an inward-looking narrative aims to ensure Lokkhi’s *mongol* boons, her restiveness associated with the home’s essential vulnerability. This is equally true for the rich. Thus, there are *panchali*-stories about proud traders losing their assets, and regaining them only after Lokkhi’s worship. One cannot be indifferent (*obohela*) towards Lokkhi, and a lot of care is needed to *keep* her. This ‘care’ centrally defines the religious experience of *shongshar*.

Most *panchali* stories convey that Lokkhi reverses people’s poverty and disharmony, the main causes of *dukkho* (unhappiness); and blesses with good marriage, wealth, and sons. Also, during marriages, every person (especially the woman) “becomes a deity” (Harman 1987, p. 171), and embodies the same qualities.¹⁰ The domestic ethical universe is intriguing, such that, devotees may even be allowed selfishness and connivance, if for the sake of the home; and the goddess may even stand in for the homemaker. So (in a particular month’s *panchali* story) when Lokkhi promises to take care of a woman’s household during her absence, she decides to commit suicide, so that her home is blessed infinitely. In another, a woman is the goddess’ embodiment, others are jealous of her, desert her in the forest, disaster falls upon the family’s seven brothers, and she is eventually reinstated to bring back peace. Similarly, mothers and sons are blessed through peasantry, and the importance of bountiful grains is evident repeatedly, for instance, in the autumnal ritual of *khetro-broto* (field-rituals), and there are even narrative instances of grains transforming to gold.

Discursive relations with Manasa are also clear: in a story, Lokkhi drowns a proud man’s seven ships (like Manasa), and later returns them. In the story of a dead snake restoring a king’s health and a poor man’s wealth, the sense is that death/disaster/Manasa can be tamed by Lokkhi’s auspiciousness. In another tale, a poor woman, unable to feed her children, tries to cook a dead snake, which turns into Lokkhi on the pan. In the reverse mood, a popular belief is that unless correct rites are followed during Bengal’s cooking festival (*ranna pujo*), when Manasa is worshipped, a snake appears on the pan (rather than the goddess), and that signifies the end of home-fertility.

My interactions with different classes of Bengali women revealed that these textual (*panchali*) thematics remain distilled in their religious experience of *shongshar*. Either through direct reading, or through the vibrant oral culture of listening to these *panchalis*, women are aware of the stories, and fashion and make sense of their lives, ethics, and experiences in terms of the narrative codes

⁸ For a succinct ethnographic analysis of constructions of feminine ethics and the making of women’s virtuosity, which combine classical Hindu idioms with folk stories and rituals (*bratas*) in Bengal, see (McDaniel 2003).

⁹ See for instance, (A. Acharya n.d.; Basak n.d.; Chakrabarti n.d.).

¹⁰ Significantly, Manasa, did not have a successful marriage, and is considered essentially fearsome.

employed in these texts. So these ethical experiences help us appreciate how the home is primarily imagined as a site of building and nourishing different aspects of *Lokkhi-mongol*, which is also critically embodied by the conch.

4.1. Bose Family

The Bose household, an upper caste/class family, has been living in the same house for three generations. The house is 95 years old, with beautiful architecture, old furniture, ornaments, and well-accomplished members. Bankim Bose, a young barrister in the early 20th century, was cheated by his friend and family, shifted home, and built this one painstakingly. But his descendants give greater credit for wealth restoration, maintenance of the huge house, and management of human relations in it, to his wife. The couple had a difficult life with a cancer patient at home, and a schizophrenic daughter. Their narrative is of developing a Lokkhi-experience of the home in the first generation, a *lokkhichara* disposition of one of the daughters in the second, and restoration of the Lokkhi-full household experience in the third.

Bankim's wife, Kamala, was a living embodiment of the goddess. She had a "lot of Lokkhi-sri" (the goddess demeanour) and was the center of the household's *mongol*. She wore a sweet smile, was peaceful, soft-spoken, and humbly covered her head with her sari. She never spent too much and maintained careful accounts. She had few saris but maintained them so well that it always seemed that she wore new clothes. Similarly, she would carefully calculate the amount of vegetables, fish, etc., every day, and see that all 25 family members received proper food. On Thursdays she would do *Lokkhipuja* and read the *panchali*. One important altar-ingredient would be a rice-grain temple signifying the home itself.

Her daughter, Bimala, got married to a prosperous family who were moneylenders to the British. They owned a house with 66 rooms. She confessed however that unlike her mother she had no interest in homemaking; that both she and her husband were *lokkhichara*, maintained no accounts, lived lavishly, sold ornaments, and lost all wealth. Her husband died early, she was childless, and returned to one small room in her father's house. The rest of her life was about financial and social indignity.

The third generation reinstated home-Lokkhi. A daughter-in-law, Indira, performs the annual autumnal Lokkhi *puja*. Indira and her husband began life with limited money, and she was 'trained' by Kamala in the homemaking art. Indira says that punctuality, thriftiness, and justness were the important Lokkhi-traits she imbibed from Kamala, rather than "making lots of money." Chaudhuri argues similarly that although Lakshmi is the goddess of prosperity, what is really intended in her persona is "grace" and "ritual certainty" (Flibbertigibbet 1966). Through Kamala-Bimala-Indira, we find the rehabilitation of the religious experience of *mongol* in the Bose family.

4.2. Sulagna

Indira's friend, Sulagna, has a different experience of Lokkhi-ness. She was brought up in an upper caste joint family. They had a big *bh(n)arar ghor*: room where grain stocks were stored, and an idol of a golden Lokkhi. They used to perform the annual Lokkhi *puja* with aplomb. Alongside usual rituals, Lokkhi would be gifted a sari, which, after the *puja*, Sulagna's mother, as Lokkhi's direct household embodiment, would wear for a year. Sulagna and her husband are rich, and have a fancy house which she manages well. Sulagna, like a true Lokkhi *bou*, is a good cook, and completely committed to her household. She was therefore most upset when her husband decided to live with another woman. She left the house and "kept Lokkhi in her place". She said, "I told the goddess, take care of the household, and if I have been a good wife, bring me back to ... my home." Her "being Lokkhi" paid, and she returned in the goddess's place. So while the woman is the goddess' embodiment in the home, the goddess replaces her, if necessary, like in the *panchali* story. Bimala's *samsaric* experience of disharmony was financial, and Sulagna's, marital. The Lokkhi-experience is rehabilitated here as well, and like Behula returned with her husband, Sulagna returns to hers.

4.3. Malati

In the contemporary period, there is another narrative about the experience of the “modern Lokkhi.” Malati, a relatively lower-class/caste woman, who is a yoga-instructor to Indira and Sulagna, also performs the Thursday *puja*. She had a poor and struggling early life. Like one of the *panchali* stories, she thinks one should be shrewd if for the sake of one’s household, and filed and won court cases against her in-laws, to ensure that her husband gets a share of ancestral property. They have now built a small house in the city’s outskirts, and Malati says it is the goddess who ensured that they live with self-respect.

Sulagna defines “being Lokkhi” as one who is able to *concentrate*. She is a school teacher, works very hard, and has limited time for *puja*. She says that unless she devotes fullest attention, she makes mistakes in both school and worship. She added that in modern times it is challenging to be the best homemaker, and feels anxious for instance, if she forgets the *panchali*. Hers is symbolic of the general working woman’s anxiety about “forgetting the home,” and always-possible disasters of “becoming A-lokkhi.” Indira is also always “balancing” her schedule, and obsessive about “*remaining* Lokkhi.” All these experiences generally point to the consistent desire to embody Lokkhi-ness in the home and the constant fear of domestic vulnerability.

Mohanty (2008) gives an evocative interpretation of the Oriya Lakshmi Purana as a modern text. In this vernacular appropriation, the text represents Lakshmi as every woman’s goddess, irrespective of class/caste. She is a feminist who wins every woman’s rights to the good home, mindful karma, and *shongshar dharma* (duty).

In distinction to the Lokkhi experience, a *lokkhichara* person, or A-lokkhi, is the disorderly, greedy, proud, disobedient woman (and her husband), who are responsible for poverty, decay, insubordination, absence/loss of children, and death. A-lokkhi is also an oppositional goddess-stereotype. Many women, including Malati, perform an A-lokkhi (*tarano*) *puja*, to get rid of A-Lokkhi on Kali *puja*’s new moon night. An A-lokkhi idol is made of cow dung, kept either in the backyard or courtyard/verandah, worshipped, requested to leave the home, and the homemaker returns without looking back at her. Doniger similarly says about snakes, that they are invoked, and simultaneously requested to leave without harming (Doniger 2015, p. 3). In other instances, A-lokkhi is worshipped with the left hand, and swept with a broom, both the left hand and broom considered inauspicious (Fruzzetti and Ostor 1984, p. 243). In Manasa’s story too, the defeated merchant, Chand, worshipped Manasa eventually, but with his left hand. The links of A-lokkhi and Manasa are thus clear again through symbolisms of the snake and inauspiciousness.

Lokkhi—A-lokkhi *pujas* together define the spectrum of *shongshar*’s religious experience. *Mongol* (sanctity and health) is invited home, and disorder, ritually forsaken.

Dipesh Chakrabarty argues that the imagination of the ideal modern domestic woman (*grihalakshmi*) took shape with reference to the discourse of Lakshmi—A-lakshmi. Lakshmi was a suitable model of the colonial woman/home, her orderliness perfecting the disciplined modern temper. Chakrabarty also says, “However she originated, Alakshmi came to embody a gendered conception of inauspiciousness and the opposite of all that the Hindu law-givers upheld as the *dharma* . . . ” (Chakrabarty 1993, pp. 7–8). While Chakrabarty gives a nuanced analysis of the modern private compared to relatively simpler postcolonial understandings, he displays a distinct ambivalence with regard to the question of time.¹¹ While he suggests that these ritual universes hide a precolonial past, he also tries to locate a colonial origin (see also Chakrabarty 2004, pp. 666–67). Thus, although there are multiple references to A-lokkhi in popular Bengali folklore, he ascribes a suddenness in his indecisive phrase, “However she originated . . . ” However, elsewhere, he argues that the category of ‘*mangal*’ (domestic wellbeing), for instance, pertains to the *kula* (community/lineage), and goes beyond the linear historical time of the nation

¹¹ Chakrabarty problematizes unequivocal oppositions of traditional and western domesticity, theorized by (Chatterjee 1990; Bagchi 1990; etc.).

(Chakrabarty 1993, pp. 28–29). Taking Chakrabarty's own cue, I argue that notions of domesticity exist in Bengali cultural memory, which exceed (post)colonial imaginations, and involve deeper senses of temporal experience.

These memories of complex goddess-domesticities, and temporal spirals of dark interiors sound in the experience of the evening conch, and *panchali* narratives. Also, besides Lokkhi, there are other goddesses who remained immediate and non-sanitized through time, as strong 'other' models of the home's experience. Manasa, particularly, remains as the critical archetypal counterpart to Lokkhi's moral universe.

4.4. Manasa Pujo: Tragedy and Fear

Snakes generally, and Manasa particularly, are insistent archetypes of Bengali religious experience and imagination. Manasa's dimensions threaten Lokkhi's calculated domesticity; and the Bengali sacred domestic includes both harmony and fear in the construction of *shongshar*. Manasa's life/death prototype draws influences from folk religion, Buddhist *tantrism*, Brahmanical Hinduism, and *bhakti* devotionalism (Chatterji 2014, p. 7).

Manasa is a combination of regeneration and destruction, desire and fear. So while she is worshipped before marriages or childbirth in rural Bengal, in her *darshan* (sight) one also views death. Loes have it that Shiva's wife, Candi, hit her out of jealousy, and so Manasa is blind in one eye, and stores poison in it. Thus, Manasa is a form of both *visa-dhara*, one holding poison, and *visa-hara*, one destroying poison (Dimock and Ramanujan 1962, p. 321; Doniger 2015, p. 2). Manasa's death-interruption transgresses Lokkhi's peaceful ethos of domestic experience.

Chatterji (2014) characterizes Manasa as a subaltern goddess since her repulsive, *bibhatsa* (disgusting) dimensions rupture Sanskrit dharma. While Mohanty (2008) establishes Lokkhi's modern avatar as a cross-class feminist goddess, Chatterji (2014) imagines Manasa as a Dalit prototype, asserting herself through disgust, fury, and humiliation. I argue however that Bengali domesticity seats both life/Lokkhi and death/Manasa, together expressed for instance in the conch's materiality. Although Lokkhi originates in the Brahmanical tradition, the discourse of her virtuosity gets domesticated in all households, irrespective of caste; and ethnographic narratives suggest that all classes of people also relate to the (desirous) fear that Manasa evokes.

I have consulted different versions of Manasa *panchalis*. The *panchali* form is typical to Lokkhi, and thus Manasa's textual representations are similar to hers. Manasa *panchalis* include *brotokotha*, *mantras* etc., and although Manasa is an independent goddess, her husband is propitiated, like Vishnu is, before Lokkhi.

Manasa is primarily described in the *panchalis* as one who fills households with bounty. Like Lokkhi she gifts pots of gold, children, and health. Indeed, the *panchali* asserts that "Lokkhi is seated in the home due to Manasa's blessings" (Dvija and Shastri n.d., p. 9).

Additionally, Manasa takes away poison (with poison), and the fear of death (with death). She destroys Chand's seven ships and six sons. But the seventh son, Lakhindar (and all others), is eventually brought back to life by her. Lakhindar remains a liminal figure in the Manasa discourse: the goddess pushes the limit of domesticity to death, but with Lakhindar, there is also always the possibility of return. The *puranic* serpent (Ananta, whose coils embody the same infinity as the *kha* of *shankha*/conch) eats its own tail, but can grow again. This concentric experience of life, death, and return, is also materially embodied in the swirled home-conch.

In Manasa *puja* narratives, there remains a persistent dissonance in the domesticity logic: here, like Lokkhi's devotees, people try to maintain restoration as an experiential focus, but cannot sustain it. Manasa narratives are productive enmeshes of the everyday and afterlife. A-lokkhi cannot fully be kept out, and there remain ambivalences among devotees about the deity herself—she is greeted with both affinity and hatred. This contradiction is also embodied in household women's experiences. So sometimes different women represent Manasa's contrary dimensions, and sometimes, the *grihini* (homemaker) embodies them all.

4.5. Sita

Like the conch itself, Sita's *shongshar* is a coiling of three folds: a secular narrative of mistrust of humans, Manasa's fertility, and Manasa's destructiveness.

Sita is from a lower caste and lower-middle class background. Her husband is a tailor, and they live in a dingy Kolkata neighbourhood. At her entrance hangs a poster, which is a peculiar welcome note. It says:

Humans,
if you accept them, they take you for granted,
respect them, they think it is appeasement,
give them advice, they do the opposite,
help them, they disown you
trust them, they harm you,
do well, they are jealous,
when sad, they take advantage,
love them, they hurt you,
and desert you when their need is fulfilled.

She said, "These are lessons of my life . . . My home is *hazarduari* (thousand-doored). I let everyone in. But they have only harmed."

Sita and her husband's families were from Bangladesh. After her in-laws died, they were deserted by the extended family. Her husband is a hardworking man, started business with meagre money, and it was a "rags to riches" story. However, his business partner was jealous, and displaced him. He then started a tailoring shop. He gradually earned a lot, and they established a factory. Sita said these were possible due to Manasa's worship at home. These clearly were Manasa's Lokkhi-like dimensions in *shongshar*. Sita performs Manasa *puja* with great splendor for an entire month of monsoon. Like other Bengali women, she performs Manasa *puja* for *shongshar's mongol*, and considers her *puja*-offerings as auspicious also for first menses and pregnant women. On the last day, five pots—for Manasa, her two female accomplices, snakes generally, and *kalnagini* specifically—are worshipped. Sita said that the goddess, happy, bestows fertility, but when angry, destroys everything.

Sita had two sons and a daughter. Her younger son married suddenly without announcement. The bride came with no belongings. Sita said she was A-lokkhi (personified), since a Lokkhi bride brings ornaments with her. Also, she would sleep till late, and even through the evening. She was greedy, asked for new saris every day, and spent all her husband's money. She would throw away home-cooked food, and keep dirty menstrual clothes unwashed. Once while arguing with her husband, she even threw her conch-bangles at Manasa's idol. One of her children were stillborn, and she was not even sad. So according to Sita, her daughter-in-law bore all signs of A-Lokkhi (and infertility): bad routine, drain of wealth, loss of child, disregard of the kitchen, and disrespect of marriage.

In 2010 winter, on *Poush shongkranti* (last day of a Bengali winter month), considered auspicious for agriculture, it happened to be a Thursday (auspicious for Lokkhi), *omaboshya* (new moon), and the following day was *grohon* (eclipse). Bengalis consider *omaboshya* and eclipses to be ominous; and thus, this day was a strong blend of fertile and inauspicious symbols. Sita decided to perform *basti* (*vastu pujo*) (home-worship). She explained that the *vastu* itself is snake and Manasa. The *puja* is performed in the house's courtyard, where rice-pudding is cooked on an earthen pot. The solidified oven-earth is then preserved.

Sita's daughter-in-law was pregnant again, and so Sita disallowed her from going out with her husband that evening. She felt that the new moon and eclipse might harm the child. But the woman (A-lokkhi) was angry. Sita explained with remorse that on that *omaboshya* night, A-lokkhi should have

ideally been sent away, but as fate would have it, Sita herself insisted that she stay back during the *vastupuja*. And, her son never returned. Later they found out that he was poisoned by the wife's lover. The wife then left the home with all his money and Sita's ornaments.

Sita's narrative of the experience of *shongshar* gives a story of building Lokkhi, and losing it all. The powers of *omaboshya* and *grohon* were greater than those of Thursday and *basti puja*. Sita said, "That woman was *a-lokkhone* (inauspicious), *bechal* (of loose morals), *uronchondi* (restless), and the *kalnagini* ... My husband cried so much that he became blind in one eye." In these utterances about A-lokkhi, Sita also called her *kalnagini*, the snake which killed Lakhindar. This was a narrative slip, since *kalnagini* is Manasa's, greatest embodiment. So unconsciously, Sita also blamed her goddess, Manasa.

There were other slips. Sita said, "The domestic fate is bad." She said there are snakes in her home, and sometimes her Manasa idol lets out green light from one eye, which is poison. Before her son died, she dreamt of many snakes—she killed them, but few could not be destroyed. Here too, Sita displayed overt disgust of snakes. In her own reckoning, the *vastu* (home) itself is (like) the coiled snake, and I have argued earlier that the snake and conch are materially related through idioms of twisted death and regeneration. These joined discourses of Lokkhi, Manasa, home, and the conch thus come together in Sita's domestic experience.

Sita has further ambivalent emotions towards the goddess. She said, "Manasa is in my veins." By this she indicated her total faith in the goddess. Again, Manasa, symbolically seated herself in Sita's husband, and he became blind in one eye. Both of them say that because of Manasa's continued presence in the home, they have managed to restore some wealth and calm.

So for Sita, Manasa comes to embody both Lokkhi and A-lokkhi. Manasa as A-lokkhi manifested in Sita's daughter-in-law, and as Lokkhi, in her and her husband. In the struggle between Sita and her daughter-in-law: the two aspects of Manasa, the Lokkhi-A-lokkhi dialectic of *shongshar*, the son was sacrificed. In Sita's narrative itself, Manasa = snake = *vastu*. The Bengali term *shaap* (snake) has a homophone, which means curse. So the *shaap/vastu* is harmed by the *shhaap/vastu*, like the snake consuming itself. Again, Sita said that Manasa is in her veins—so she shall reinstate the home, the snake shall reinvigorate. Symbolically almost, for as long as she spoke, Sita's hair-bun kept unfastening, and she quickly tied it up every time.

When I was leaving, Sita said through simultaneous allusions to fertility and death, that although she lost everything with her son: her complexion, hair, beauty, and desire to live; she cannot die by will, so "she continues to convert the raw to cooked". Like the conch's coils, *shongshar* is the twirling of life and afterlife. This is what Sita calls *niyoti*, fate.

4.6. Sadhana

Every year, after Manasa *puja*, many women are possessed (*bhor*) by the goddess, drums are sounded, and Manasa speaks through them about birth and disaster. Once she spoke through Sadhana. Unlike in Sita's household, in Sadhana's, she herself is Manasa's ambivalent embodiment: the seat of fertility and destruction, affinity and fear. Once when she fell very ill, she underwent Manasa's *bhor*, and started Manasa *puja* for recovery. She remembered, "I (as mother) said that I would be fine, and my *shongshar* would be Manasa's own".

Sadhana, from the lowest of castes, was extremely poor, when as a five-year-old she migrated to the city. Her father played the *dhaak* (drums) in *pujas*, mother worked as maidservant, and they lived on footpaths. She started work as domestic help, since when she was seven. She got married at fifteen, her husband did not earn, and the couple eventually separated. She had six children, two survived. Finally, she worshipped Manasa, and after "taking care of one child like fire in a hurricane", she survived. Sadhana maintains the rhetoric of domestic vulnerability throughout. After years of struggle, she has made some money, and a small house. In her insistent poverty, bad marriage, and loss of children, she embodies destruction; and in hard work and regaining of health, revival.

Sadhana performs an annual Manasa *puja* at home during monsoon. This worship is also intended towards the goddess of food, Annapurna. The conch is sounded to let the goddess know that her food

is being prepared. All through the night before the *puja*, Manasa's *panchali* is read, and a lot of food cooked on earthen oven. This critical act is performed with perseverance, since if the earthen pitchers break, the goddess is angry, appears as a snake in the hearth, and signifies a lifetime's loss of wealth. The cooking must take place inside the home (unlike A-lokkhi *pujo* which is performed outside). So Manasa bears A-lokkhi's marks of devastation, but demands to be treated like Lokkhi. The next morning, Manasa and her snakes are worshipped. As Annapurna too, Manasa is the fertility goddess.

Sadhana's narrative also reveals intensely ambivalent responses towards her deity; like Sita, she is the perfect seat of *critical piousness*. She says that there are snakes which stay in and protect her home (*vastu-shaap*). They are divine, and do not allow harm to fall upon her household. Yet she hates their sight, is very scared of them, and prays to them to not appear before her. She used to have dreams of snakes coiled together, but ever since she worshipped Manasa, the goddess found a rightful place, and the snaky dreams stopped. While Sadhana says she gets angry if anyone is disrespectful to "her mother", she herself admits to also cursing her. She said, "Just because Manasa is unhappy, she is jealous, and does not let others be happy. She is *shoitaani* (devil)". She added that snakes can bring both fortune and disaster: "*shaap-i obhishaap*" ("Snakes are curses"). She stresses that she loves Manasa, but does not enter her temple after dark—Manasa's poisonous glare scares her.

In my analysis too, just as coiled snakes are revered as embodiments of both disaster and revival, the other embodiment of a natural spiral kept at home, the conch, too, is a reminder of both Lokkhi-like restorative peace as well as a desirous fear and freedom of the afterlife.

Doniger aptly refers to the experience of the "ambivalent attitude to ambivalent snake goddesses", as *dvesa-bhakti*, or "devotion through hatred" (Doniger 2015, p. 3). This is particularly comparable to the devotional aesthetic style of *nindastuti* (worship through criticism) in Sanskrit literature. Sadhana's paradoxical relationship with Manasa also reminds of the *bhakti* poet Ramprasad's relationship with Kali. Dalmiya says about his worship that, "Praying to Kali becomes a relentless litany of her faults and misdemeanors, and these are harped upon in the very act of seeking redemption through her! So not only is Kali paradoxical herself, but so also is the *love* of Kali" (Dalmiya 2000, p. 127).

4.7. Kishore

Sita's and Sadhana's stories speak of psychological ruptures in domestic religious experiences, which affect health, fertility, and wellbeing. Kishore's narrative reveals other dimensions of loss (of property) where Manasa's ambivalence plays out in business, material holdings, and family lives. Decadence manifests in a shrinking business, and shift from a happy joint family to modern nuclear flats. Like the other two, Kishore's narrative has frequent symbolic references connecting their life with Manasa's. So, like Manasa's opponent, Chand's family, they are seven brothers. Their family migrated from East Bengal, and they form a network with other migrants in their thriving textile business. This relatively middle-upper caste, rich family used to own a big house with 30 rooms, and now live in a multistoried complex in a posh urban locality, where there is a roof-temple with a Manasa idol holding snakes, and her four companions—two holding lotuses, and two, conches.

While in East Bengal, their father, as a toddler, was once very unwell, and became almost blind. His grandmother dreamt that if they worshipped Manasa, he would recover. The priest worshipped the goddess, and the ritual water was sprinkled on his eyes. He regained sight, but thereafter bore water marks in his eyes. His mother later found a jeweled-*ghot* and conch in a pond, and a snake appeared and told her that she should start Manasa *puja* at home. She did, but also went mad after that. Kishore said that the *ghot* was *obhishopto* (cursed), and brought with it both Lokkhi and A-Lokkhi. So it was a story of tremendous economic uplift after that, but the mother lost her sanity.

Even after migrating they continued Manasa *puja* at home, and it is now 104 years old. The annual revenue of the family business was used for the worship. However, the family could not continue to live together due to incessant fights. So they sold their property to a promoting group.

So Manasa brought both wealth and decadence in the family-business dyad. Like Sita's husband, Kishore's father bore Manasa's mark in his eye, and some family members believe that he was most

afflicted by her, and the domestic embodiment of her ethics. So while it is more common for women to embody goddesses and the ambivalent home, *shongshar* more generally is the site of sacred morality.

In the Manasa-Behula chronicle of the Manasa Mangalkavya, the goddess instructed the blacksmith to leave a vermillion mark as identification on Behula-Lakhindar's iron marriage-chamber's hole, for the deadly *kalnagini*, to enter (Dvija and Shastri n.d., p. 13). The snake climbed on their bed through Behula's open hair (Dimock and Ramanujan 1964, p. 314). In another telling, Behula, angry, throws her *sindur* at the snake, and snakes ever since carry red spots. Vermillion and long black hair, quintessential symbols of the Lokkhi woman, themselves thus become possibilities of death during intimacy. Like the evening conch-sound twirling out of the coiled *shankh*, and like knotted hair unfastening, Lokkhi unfastens to Manasa, and the home relaxes towards abandonment.

5. Conclusions

The Bengali religious experience of the home includes the long-drawn sounding of the conch at dusk, and domesticated deities: the *lokkhi* woman, the female snake-goddess, and persistent folklore about Behula-Lakhindar's immortal powers of marital resuscitation. The icon of ultimate *mongol* (wellbeing), Lokkhi, also anticipates senses of domestic vulnerability; Manasa and her devotion carry ambivalent messages of death and regeneration; and the conch's materiality and sensory universe twirl through these opposed sensibilities of interior attachment and renunciate slits. The home/*vastu* thus becomes the site of experiencing both security and openness. This openness could imply detachment, freedom, death, or expanse.

So the Bengali Hindu domestic space particularly (and certain South Asian Hindu archetypes more generally), involve contrary messages of sacred homemaking. The home altar is itself also the renouncing space, and the *samsaric* fertile body, the detached body. The home enacts upon its folds, which coil inward toward comforts, and disentangle outward, with A-lokkhi, and *shankh* sounds: through the interstices of conch-contours and twilight. The frictions of these folds constitute *shongshar*. There are narrative journeys from disaster to fortune and vice-versa, and the serpentine *vastu* is reborn through these performances. The symbol of everyday restoration and rebirth, the conch (*shankh*) and its sonics, open to the sea, and the sea can both kill and heal. Like the *puranic* serpent eating its tail and its growing again, this infinite concentricity does not speak of eternity, but endless life including, not transcending death (Wake 1873, p. 378). *Shongshar* twirls peace and fear, love and hate, Lokkhi and Manasa; and the *shankh* is the embodied kernel of this snake-folding.

However, the *shankh* is not only a spatial embodiment of the home's religious experience; its twisted depths also take us into refracted shadows of the ocean's interior and time's sacred inside. So the paper also helps reimagine temporal/historical experience: the Bengali home and its postcolonial understandings, precolonial materiality, and essential temporal archetypes.

Analyzing Home Science discourses circulating since the 1910s, Hancock (2001) argues that the home and women's experiences emerged as sites of imagining a future nation. Like Chatterjee (1993) she views the home as the location of interior traditional grammar, in distinction to the modern outside. She says however that the gendered domestic discourse and experience, carried traces of precolonial vernacular distinctions between interiority and exteriority. These distinctions were not fixed. For instance, she says, following A. K. Ramanujan, that in Tamil classical Hindu poetics, "house" simultaneously also means the self and womanhood. With the influence of Victorian conceptions of gendered spaces however, the private and public became relatively more congealed. The home became the interior feminine domain, standing against the masculine modern public (ibid, pp. 875–76). I argue however, that this discussion about political appropriations of interiority does not consider that the precolonial influences could not simply have disappeared. Everyday domestic experience is the best locale to imagine different politics of time's folds upon sacred textures of life. Mundane temporality—ingrained in senses of passage, decay, renewal, birth, and disaster, narrated in goddess stories of Lokkhi/Manasa, and embodied in artefacts such as the conch—supersedes historicity. But postcolonial theorizations of Chatterjee (1993), Hancock (2001), Sarkar (2001), and even their

critique, K. Chatterjee (2008), who tries to extend history to the *puranas*, are locked only in sequential secular time.

Chakrabarty (1993) hints at alternative temporal imaginations. He says that the notion of *grihalakshmi*, “is the horizon where history “unworks”, i.e., ‘encounters interruption, fragmentation, suspension’. The reality of this past, to speak with Levinas, therefore ‘must not only be determined in its historical objectivity, but also from interior intentions, from the secrecy that interrupts the continuity of historical time’” (ibid, p. 29). Chakrabarty also says that the sacred-aesthetic ideas of beauty (*‘mangal’*) that Lakshmi carries with her, are carried over from everyday performances and Mangalkavyas, in which, the divine and mortal worlds are not separate (ibid, p. 28). In another article, published a decade later, he similarly evokes senses of non-secular time, again through the Manglakavyas (Chakrabarty 2004, p. 679).

I have argued that the regenerative home and its folds address these secret interiorities of time and space, as *shongshar*: the Bengali religious experience of the everyday, where goddesses, *shankh*, and devotees meet, to understand life and death.

This paper has tried to understand the Bengali Hindu home (with the conch as its embodied kernel) as a locale where contrary religious experiences and ethics enact through worship idioms and practices of Lokkhi and A-lokkhi/Manasa. There are three major analytical functions of this understanding of the ambivalent nature of sacred domestic experience. First, it revisits and problematizes the insistent trope of the home as the secured hearth, and the protecting domain from the outside world. Second, it helps conceptualize ways in which elements of the household—people and objects—also embody the religious contrarities of peace and fear. Finally, it reimagines the space and time of domestic experience, in the image of the conch itself, beyond dialectics of interiority-exteriority or linearity-circularity, as a *spiraling* of sacred emotional experiences.

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